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Coming to College Twice: The Impact of First Semester Freshman Study Abroad Programs on Student Transition to a Residential Campus

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COMING TO COLLEGE TWICE: THE IMPACT OF FIRST SEMESTER FRESHMAN
STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS ON STUDENT TRANSITION
TO A RESIDENTIAL CAMPUS

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business
Department of Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Ryan G. Hawkins

May 2017

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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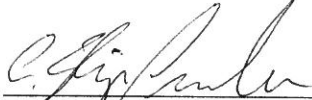
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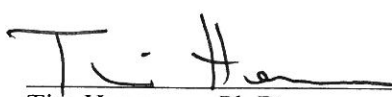
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Abstract

For many American college students, the first major life transition they face is moving from their parents' home into a university residence hall in the fall following high school graduation. During this period of transition, students must learn how to live in a new place, develop friendships, and figure out how to navigate a new academic environment (Kneipp, Kelly, & Cyphers, 2009). What happens to that transitional process when a student does not begin his or her college career on their home campus? According to the Open Doors Reports from the Institute of International Education (2015), approximately 10,331 college freshmen studied abroad during the 2013/14 academic year.

The present study sought to answer the question, "What impact does spending first semester of freshman year abroad in a living-learning community have on student transition to college?" Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher gathered the experiences of students from three cohorts of a single first-semester freshman study abroad program at a small, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. The major finding of this study showed that students who transition halfway through their first college academic year do struggle with the transition but have a support structure in their fellow program participants that helps them through the initial struggle of being in a new place. The implications for practice found in this study encourage residence life professionals to play an active part in these students' lives during the first weeks they are on campus in order to set them up for academic success over the next couple of years.

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While my name is the only one on the title page of this thesis, the research and writing process was a communal effort. This project would never have been completed without the help and encouragement of the following people.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Summary of Problem	2
Purpose	2
Research Question	3
Chapter 2 Literature Review	4
Transition to College.....	4
Living Learning Communities.....	6
Study Abroad.....	7
Reentry from Study Abroad	10
Summary	13
Chapter 3 Methodology	14
Design and Approach.....	14
Participants	15
Procedures	15
Analysis.....	16
Chapter 4 Results.....	17
Difficulty Transitioning Halfway through the Year	18

Homesickness 20

The Impact of Trip Participants 21

The Impact of Students on Campus 23

Role of Experiential Learning 25

Chapter 5 Discussion 27

 Implications for Practice 30

 Implications for Future Research..... 31

 Limitations..... 32

 Conclusion..... 33

References 35

Appendix A: Email to Potential Participants 41

Appendix B: Interview Questions 42

Appendix C: Informed Consent 43

Chapter 1

Introduction

People experience periods of transition many times during their life. For many, the transition from home to a college campus is the first major life transition they will face. Students transition from heavy reliance on a parent or guardian to a high level of independence. During this time, students must learn how to live in a new place, develop friendships, and figure out how to navigate a new, more challenging academic environment (Kneipp, Kelly, & Cyphers, 2009). If this transition is not done well, it could have a negative impact on a student's college experience or affect a student's ability to finish his or her degree. According to Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and DuPont (2009), only 4 in 10 students enrolled in a 4-year institution graduate within 6 years. Helping students transition is an important part of raising that number. Research shows that how a student goes through the process of adjusting to life on a college campus will impact the remainder of a student's time at the institution (Hurtado et al., 2007).

What happens when a student does not begin his or her college career on campus? During the 2013/14 academic year, 264,886 undergraduate students in the United States participated in a study abroad program (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2015). Of those 264,886 students, 3.9% , or approximately 10,331, were freshmen. That number is up from 3% of freshmen who studied abroad during the 2003/04 academic year. While the IIE does not specify how many of those freshmen studied

abroad their first semester, several universities have programs to give first-semester freshmen the opportunity to study abroad. With so many freshmen arriving on campus a semester after most of their peers, colleges must be ready to assist these students with transitional issues that may look different from a typical new student's experiences.

Summary of Problem

The first few weeks are crucial when making a successful transition to college. Students who choose to spend their first semester of college abroad miss this crucial time of building relationships on campus and the opportunity to understand campus culture along with the vast majority of their classmates. Instead, these students get to know only a handful of their classmates at the beginning of the year and must step into preexisting social structures and a new academic environment halfway through the academic year. In addition, this student population faces the potential of negative effects from reverse culture shock in the process of re-entry from the semester abroad.

Purpose

Numerous studies have been done on reverse culture shock and re-entry from study abroad. Unfortunately, the impact of spending the first semester of freshman year abroad on a student's college transition remains relatively unexplored. With such limited research on the subject, the current study sought to explore the impact of a student's choice to spend his or her first college semester abroad on the transition to a residential college setting. Specifically, this study looked at the impact of semester abroad programs that use a living-learning community model. This exploration can aid student affairs and study abroad professional in helping these freshmen transition to life on a college campus at a time when most of their peers have already been on campus for a semester.

Research Question

The current study endeavored to answer the question, “What impact does spending first semester of freshman year abroad in a living-learning community have on student transition to college?”

Chapter 2

Literature Review

A lack of literature addresses the topic of first-semester freshman study abroad programs and their effect on a student's transition to college. However, substantial literature does exist on transition to college, living-learning communities, study abroad, and reentry from study abroad that aid in the exploration of this topic.

Transition to College

Much literature explores the issues surrounding a student's transition to the college environment. Integrating into a college or university community is often a complex process that involves finding a balance between old and new environments and is difficult for most students to manage (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Recognizing this difficulty, Tinto (1998) found that students who are academically and socially involved in the first few months of their first year of college make a smoother transition and are more likely to return for their sophomore year. Notably, students do not always fit into their new college environment right away. Students may exist in what Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens (2009) called a "betwixt space between home and university" (p. 38). To make the transition out of this betwixt space, students must experience what these authors called a turning point, or an "event(s) or an experience(s) within the first six to eight weeks at university that both stands out and also triggers and results in the student developing (or not) a sense of belonging to university life" (p. 38).

In other words, a turning point can either make a student feel at home on a college campus or make the transition experience difficult and potentially unsuccessful.

Research highlights several factors that impact a first-year student's transition from high school into college. During the first couple of days away from home, students may lean on family and friends from home to provide them with the support necessary to get through the stressful time. As time progresses, however, students begin to lean on social relationships in their residence halls for the support to make a successful transition to college (Wilcox et al., 2005). A common experience for students transitioning away from home to a college campus is homesickness. Homesickness can lead to problems with concentration and low motivation (Terry, Leary, & Mehta, 2013). Students report the two most helpful groups of people in aiding transition and dealing with homesickness are parents and friends (Smith & Zhang, 2008). Conversely, students report high school counselors, high school teachers, and college orientation programs were not helpful in assisting with the transition from high school to college.

Students making the transition to college must also cope with the academic change from high school to the college. This period entails a significant gain in learning and cognitive development (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). A successful transition to college also hinges on the ability of a student to adjust quickly to a learning environment that requires greater autonomy than the high school learning environment (Brinksworh, MacCann, Mathews, & Nordström, 2009). This may be difficult for a large number of incoming first-year students. A study done by McCarthy and Kuh (2006) surveyed 170,000 high school seniors and found a gap between the learning habits of those students and what was expected of them in a college classroom. Reason et al.

(2006) found that students' sense of support, high levels of cognitive and academic engagement, and perceptions of institutional challenge may assist them in gaining the academic competence necessary for academic success at the college level. While this focus on academic adjustment may have a secondary role in the life of a student trying finding his or her footing on campus, researchers have found that it is important for teachers and other academic affairs professionals to be approachable and help students gain confidence in the college classroom (Smith & Zhang, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2005).

Living-Learning Communities

For some first-year students, coming to college means moving into a living-learning community. According to McClanahan (2014), "Living learning communities (LLCs) were developed to provide students with a community to connect personal professional, and academic experiences on a daily basis" (p. 191). Living-learning communities or programs involve students living together in a section of or an entire residence hall. The program has staff and other resources dedicated to that program, and the students involved in the community take part in special programming and events designed specifically for them (Inkelas, 2010). Stassen (2003) listed the following five types of learning communities, which may or may not be living-learning communities with residential components:

1. Linked communities (two courses independent of each other, but with common students)
2. Learning clusters (courses linked by content)
3. Freshmen interest groups (courses linked by theme)
4. Federated learning communities (faculty as the linchpin)

5. Coordinated studies programs (where all students' course credits are associated with an integrated, theme-based, interdisciplinary curriculum designed through intensive collaboration). (p. 584)

These programs seek to improve undergraduate education by helping students transition successfully into college, improving student learning and development, and facilitating better academic achievement and retention among first-year students (Inkelas, 2010).

Living in living-learning community offers many benefits. With significant research in the field, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) made the following observation:

Extensive documentary evidence suggests that effective learning communities have important benefits for students including higher academic achievement, better retention rates, greater satisfaction with college life, improved quality of thinking and communicating, a better understanding of self and others, and a greater ability to bridge the gap between academic and social worlds. (p. 6)

Other studies have confirmed these conclusions and added to the list of benefits.

Academic benefits of being in a living-learning community during a student's first year of college include higher first semester GPAs (Stassen, 2003), easier transition to college for first-generation students (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007), and a higher rate of retention (Pike, 1999). Research has also shown that involvement in living-learning communities increases student involvement (Pike, 1999), satisfaction (Astin, 1993), and student faculty interaction (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994).

Study Abroad

Students who choose to spend their first semester abroad not only have to transition to college with a group of their peers, but they must also navigate the new

environment that comes with studying abroad in a foreign country. McKeown (2009) provided the following definition of study abroad:

. . . an academic experience, whether short term (as short as one week) or longer (up to a full academic year), during which students physically leave the United States to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country. (p.11).

International educators seemingly agree that these programs include travel to a foreign country for study, but there is much debate about duration, credit-granting, collegial arrangement with institutions, and program finances (Costello, 2015). Niser (2010) listed four types of study abroad program common to New England schools that may clarify the study abroad definition: one-to-one arrangements, partnerships with a host institution, program run by study abroad providers, and programs managed by a home institution.

Interest and participation in a variety of study abroad program types has grown substantially in recent years. According to the most recent Open Doors Report from the IIE (2015), 304,467 students from the United States studied abroad for academic credit in 2013/14. According to the same report, the number of students reported to have studied abroad increased 5% from the previous year. Rust, Dhanatya, Furuto, and Kheiltash (2008) found that 53.8% of freshmen already had interest in studying abroad as they came to college. Students most inclined to study abroad are females who come to college directly from high school and attend well-respected, private, liberal arts colleges. These students have high SAT scores and good high school GPAs. Institutions can begin to track the interest level and chances of a student studying abroad beginning in their first year of college. Freshmen who are active socially, academically, politically, and

communally and who are involved in diverse activities are much more likely to go abroad than those who were not. Students' involvement with populations different from their own also plays a role in the likelihood of participation in study abroad.

Students who choose to participate in study abroad programs seem to do so first and foremost because they recognize the benefits and advantages that studying abroad provides (Spiering & Erickson, 2006). Students who participate in study abroad, as noted earlier, seem to have had the desire prior to applying to a program. They discussed these plans and had them affirmed by others, and participating in studying abroad fit well into their college plans. Dolby (2004) noted that White female students believe studying abroad offers them new opportunities to socialize and see new sites.

Much research has examined why students choose not to engage in study abroad opportunities. Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2015) contended that major factors influencing a student's decision to study abroad are general perceptions of the program, level of intercultural awareness, level of personal growth, professional development, intellectual growth, and duration and cost of the international experience. While students have myriad reasons for studying abroad, many students, after weighing their options, opt not to participate in these programs. Costello (2015) found four main reasons that students choose not to study abroad: 1) perceptions that programs are reserved for the rich; 2) perceptions that programs are costly; 3) minority students' fear of prejudices abroad; and 4) advisors of minority students who avoid questions of race and ethnicity.

The benefits of studying abroad far outweigh the drawbacks and barriers (Costello, 2015). Through the study abroad experience, students can develop new perspectives on education and real-world events, become fluent in a foreign language,

experience personal growth, and develop valuable career skills (Spiering & Erickson, 2006). Ingraham and Peterson (2004) added an increased level of intercultural awareness to the list of benefits. Still, freshmen who study abroad may not receive all of these benefits. Studies show that students who study abroad during their junior year gain the greatest amount of intercultural awareness, particularly in the areas of international political concern, cross-cultural interest, and cultural cosmopolitanism (Carlson & Widaman, 1988).

Reentry from Study Abroad

Students spending their first semester of college abroad go through the college transition process twice. The first time, the transition is to college and to the study abroad environment in their host country, and the second is the transition back to their native culture and to their home campus. In the field of international education, it is thought that a student's readjustment to the home culture when returning from study abroad is more difficult than adjusting to the new culture in a foreign country (Young, 2014). When students first arrive at their host site or university, they may experience culture shock, which Young defined as "the emotions and subsequent behaviors brought on by immersion in a new or different cultural situation than that to which one is accustomed" (p. 59). Reverse culture shock is therefore the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one's home culture after living in a different culture for an extensive time (Gaw, 2000). This process should be viewed as something a student goes through, not simply a physical transition to home (Arthur, 2003).

Travelers experience reverse culture shock as a result of reentry in different ways and for different lengths of time. Many experience no effects, and others experience a

tremendous amount of shock that lasts anywhere from a few months to a year. The transition is easier if the student reenters his or her home culture from a similar culture. If the culture in which a student studies abroad differs vastly from the home culture, he or she may have a longer or more difficult reentry period (Adler, 1981). Attempting to explain the reentry process an individual undergo, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) developed the W-Curve Hypothesis. A person begins at the top of the “W” with a honeymoon phase when he or she arrives at their study abroad site. Following the arrival energy, an individual goes through a low point as he or she attempts to adjust to a new environment. When a person finally adapts to the new environment, the high returns and carries over into the process of returning home to everything familiar to them. The sojourner hits another low point as he or she works through the adjustment process to their home—but seemingly new—culture. The “W” model finishes as the traveler readjusts to the home culture. This model is not without its critics. Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) suggested that studies have noted a variety of problems to varying degrees in sojourners returning from a long-term cross-cultural experience. The W-Curve Hypothesis does not account for these variations in individual traveler experiences. Despite its critics, the model provides a good initial understanding of what students go through when they return from studying in a foreign culture.

A great deal of research has been done to find some of the common effects of reentry from long-term cross-cultural experiences. A modified version of the Reentry Shock Scale developed by Seiter and Weddell (1989) indicated that students with study abroad experiences are significantly more skeptical of their home culture than those who did not have experience studying abroad (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). The same

study found that students who were abroad for a whole semester showed greater skepticism than those who had participated in a trip lasting only a couple of weeks. Sojourners may also experience a difference in communicating with others upon their return. While communicating with parents or siblings appears easier after studying abroad, communication with peers can prove more superficial and guarded than before the study abroad experience (Martin, 1986). In addition to communication issues, students returning from study abroad may experience a sense of isolation, cultural identity conflict, depression, anxiety, and other interpersonal difficulties (Martin, 1984; Raschio, 1987; Young, 2014). If students learn effective communication strategies, they can overcome the challenges of the reentry process and learn how to constructively reflect on their cross-cultural experience (Young, 2014).

Universities can implement programs to show students they care. Minor steps may help, such as a letter welcoming a student back to campus or hosting informal conversations about readjustment and reverse culture shock (Young, 2014). If they wish to do more, institutions can host dinners on campus or in homes dedicated to a theme students encountered while abroad or how experiences students had abroad can complement their education upon returning to campus. Universities can also help students readjust to campus life through academic means such as offering a reentry course or hosting writing workshops in which students can write on themes from their time abroad. Such gestures may assist students returning from study abroad in overcoming the communication and psychological issues they may experience as a result of spending a long period of time in a foreign culture.

Summary

Despite a shortage of literature specifically focused on freshmen study abroad programs, looking at the literature surrounding the issues of transition to college, living-learning communities, study abroad, and reentry from study abroad can be helpful in formulating a deeper understanding of the effects of these programs on a student's transition to college.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design and Approach

This study utilized a qualitative methodology to understand how studying abroad in the first semester of college impacts college student transition. Qualitative research is useful when examining a problem and developing a “detailed understanding of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 16). Specifically, a phenomenological design was used to explore how spending the first semester of one’s freshman year studying abroad in a living-learning community (LLC) impacts a student’s transition to college. A phenomenological study “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The goal of phenomenological research is to determine what an event meant to participants and how those participants experienced it (van Manen, 1990). In this regard, van Manen characterized a phenomenological approach to research as without presupposition. It seeks to “ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques, and concepts that would rule-govern the research project” (p. 29). Phenomenological research records and analyzes how participants have processed through an experience, as opposed to analyzing descriptions of an event.

Participants

This study involved college sophomores, juniors, and seniors who were enrolled full time at a small, private, residential liberal arts institution in the Midwest. The institution has approximately 2,000 undergraduate students, over 90% of whom live in campus housing. Participants in the current study spent the entire first semester of their freshman year studying abroad in a living-learning community focused on the culture of the nation where the program takes place. The program is conducted by the institution and only involved students who are enrolled at the institution and plan to continue their studies on campus following the semester abroad.

First, the researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and obtained permission to use the off-campus program database to collect names and e-mail addresses from participants in the study abroad program during the fall semesters of 2013, 2014, and 2015. An email was sent to all participants in the program during those three semesters inviting their participation in the study. The study had eight participants, two males and six females. Participants included three sophomores, one junior, and four seniors.

Procedures

The researcher obtained written consent from each participant to participate in the study. Each participant was interviewed for between 20 and 45 minutes. They were encouraged to describe their experience honestly and to avoid generalizations, simplifications, and theoretical interpretations as much as possible (van Manen, 1990). The interviews were semi-structured with a set of prepared questions, as well as follow-up questions asked by the researcher that were not in the protocol. The audio of each

interview was recorded. The researcher took notes during and after each interview to provide additional clarity to statements made during the interview. The interviews were then transcribed from the recordings. Transcription was done both by the researcher and a paid transcription service.

Analysis

The researcher conducted preliminary exploration of the data to gather a general sense of the responses and to begin organizing the data (Creswell, 2012). The researcher then coded interviews for themes. Coding the data allowed the researcher to begin to form broad themes from the participants in the study. Following the coding process, the researcher looked for redundancy of the codes and reduced the codes to themes. The most prominent themes are recorded in Chapter 4 of this study.

Chapter 4

Results

Each of the eight participants—six female and two male students—spent the first semester of their freshman college year abroad in the same study abroad program. The participants were abroad from late April to late November, with some staying a couple of weeks longer for leisure travel after the program. All participants acknowledged in some way that spending the first semester of college abroad impacted their transition into life on a residential campus. This fact emerged through various responses, indicating that transitioning to a college campus later than most of the freshman class had an impact on their transition experience. This chapter highlights the main themes that emerged from the interviews, as well as several more minor themes.

Each interview began with a question about the participant's experience studying abroad. While this question did not focus on the central research inquiry, it allowed for the participant and researcher to become comfortable in the interview process and for the participant to begin reflecting on an experience that may have occurred a couple of years prior to the interview. Following the initial question, the researcher asked broad questions about participants' experiences transitioning back to the United States and specifically to campus. These questions invited participants to reflect on not only their study abroad experience but also their transition time after being abroad. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, responses to these questions also gave the

researcher more information to ask questions about later in the interview. In the last phase of the interview, the researcher asked specific questions relating to areas of transition the participant may have experienced. These questions were designed to illuminate the specifics of the impact that the semester abroad had on participants' transition to campus in areas such as academics, family relationships, and social life. The interviews lasted from 20 to 45 minutes and were subsequently transcribed and thematically coded. From the transcribed interviews, five themes emerged: the difficulty of transitioning to campus halfway through the year, homesickness, the impact of trip participants, the impact of students on campus, and the role of participant learning in the transition process.

Theme 1: Difficultly Transitioning Halfway Through the Year

All participants expressed that making the transition to a residential community halfway through the year proved difficult, but beyond the transition's difficulty, there was little agreement among participants about what made the experience hard. Still, four participants did note that the transition was difficult because they felt like outsiders.

Subtheme: Feeling like an outsider. Four participants mentioned feeling like an outsider when they arrived on campus, which was difficult for them. When asked about first arriving on campus, Participant 1 recalled feeling "...very outsider-y. What's the best word for that? Like a foreigner. Myself, I'm from around here, so I was very familiar with the [university] culture, and still felt like a foreigner in some way."

The other three participants who expressed feeling like the outsider or foreigner seemed to describe their experience in similar terms to Participant 1 and with a similar tone of voice and temperament when discussing this difficult time in their college

experience. The participants felt like outsiders because they did not know many people beyond the group with whom they studied abroad. When talking about what made the experience of transitioning difficult, Participant 8 said, “More that I didn’t know very many people. Because there’s this thing called the freshmen frenzy so everybody starts to get to know each other, and I wasn’t exactly a part of that.”

The idea that they missed out on much of the early collegiate experience made the transition difficult for many participants because the campus was not as much in the mindset of welcoming new people in January or February as in August or September.

Other reasons for difficult transition. Apart from a seemingly shared experience of feeling like outsiders, the difficulties of participants were shared among cohorts of participants, among roommate pairings, or had to do with the personalities and attitudes of participants, but there was nothing common among all participants. Some participants had a difficult time transitioning academically from a highly experience-based educational model while abroad to a traditional classroom on campus in the United States. According to Participant 3,

A lot of it was like laid back and then the schedule changed so much to where “Hey, you have more time to work on this.” Or, “hey, this is due like really soon.” It was a lot of flexibility with the schedule over there, whereas here it’s just like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom and you have to be caught up. You have to be aware of what’s going on and stuff like that.

Other participants had a difficult time coming to campus because of the living area they were placed in upon their arrival. When reflecting on living areas, Participant 8 recalled,

And then coming here . . . I came at a really bad time to be honest . . . because the wing was having troubles with their freshmen when I came in and there was a lot of fights, and a lot of division between freshmen and a lot of the upperclassmen said, “I’m sorry This is the worst time you could possibly come in.”

In addition to these two experiences, other participants had trouble with family or specific elements within their department or major that made the transition difficult. These were not experiences shared with others in the group but nonetheless significantly impacted the transition experience of some participants in the study.

Theme 2: Homesickness

Five of the eight participants reported that they felt some degree of homesickness during the transition to campus. This response, a common theme in existing literature, was not surprising. What made the participants’ experience different from the typical student coming to a residential campus is that, instead of feeling homesick for wherever they had lived with family, they felt homesick for or a longing to return to where they had studied abroad. This feeling was expressed in interviews of participants from all three cohorts participating in this study, which shows that it was nothing about one cohort’s experience that brought this feeling up in the transition process.

Participants in the program were abroad in the host country for so long that the host country and the city in which they lived began to feel like home. In describing this feeling, Participant 6 said, “I didn’t just live in [the country], like it wasn’t just like just a place that I lived in for a while, it became my home.” That sense of the host country becoming home resulted in the participant feeling homesick upon returning to the U.S.

For some participants, the homesickness was simply missing the place, while for others it was missing the place and the experience of being abroad with such a small group of people compared to the number of students on campus. Participant 2 well summarized this sentiment shared many participants:

I think a lot of it was wishing we were [still abroad]. I think that was one of the hardest parts. Not necessarily that we didn't want to be here or that it was hard to be here, because we were all excited to be here. But we also really wanted to go back and have that experience again, because it was such a big impact on our lives.

When discussing the homesickness they all felt for the country they had called home for a semester, participants noted different parts of their time abroad. Some talked about the country they lived in, while others mentioned the friends they had met and the city they lived in. Like participant two, still others talked about the way the program was run and the experience it gave them. The difference between students who had an experience like the study participants and the typical student is that the participants and those abroad with them longed to be back in the country because of the experience it gave them. They were missing and longing for home cooking and familiar surroundings.

Theme 3: The Impact of Trip Participants

Seven of the eight participants expressed that the people who were abroad with them played a role in their transition experience. A common phrase participants used in when referring to this group was *support system*. Participant 2 said,

We weren't all in the same dorm or anything, but knowing just that I have a support system on campus while I was transitioning into trying to figure out my

place on my floor and my area of study . . . having the support system was a lot easier than I anticipated.

This sense of the group helping the transition process emerged in conversation with at least one participant from all three years of the study abroad program represented in the participant group. When reflecting on what most helped make the transition smooth, Participant 4, who studied abroad in a different year, said,

I think the fact that our group was so close, which I know is a really unique thing and isn't always something that can be replicated, but I think that's honestly probably the biggest thing that was a help is how close we all had gotten and how close we all ended up staying together. I'd say that was probably the biggest thing that helped with transitioning.

While the positive side of having the group support system was the majority experience, two participants did acknowledge times when it was a hindrance to the smooth transition participants hoped to make. This feeling emerged from Participant 1:

We saw a lot of each other, which was good. It was also kind of bad because that really developed or strengthened that reliance and dependency on each other even though we really made it an effort to branch out, because [the University] is a big school and we really wanted to do that.

These examples show that students who spend their first semester abroad have something that a lot of other students do not have when they come to college: a network of friends who can support them in the shared transition experience. This support system is overwhelmingly seen as positive, but caution should be taken to avoid some of the negative side effects of having such a tight knit group to lean on for support.

Theme 4: The Impact of Students on Campus

All eight participants talked about how the people they met on campus played a role in the transition experience. Some mentioned peers, and others focused mostly on residence hall student leaders who helped with their transition to campus. No matter which of the two groups participants spoke about, the general sense was that the people who lived around them had a significant impact on the transition to life on campus.

Subtheme: Peers in the residence halls. Participants had both good and bad experiences with those who lived around them. The participants who had good experiences said that those relationships helped them feel at home on campus. For example, according to Participant 6, the people who lived around him played a significant role in his transition experience:

They knew that we were not there for a lot of things that had already happened, a lot of bonding that had already happened on the wing, and they took us in. I had two roommates with me. When I was [abroad]. We all came in the same room together. And they kind of took us all in, but they also acknowledged that the disconnect did exist.

For Participant 6, it was not simply that the men who lived around him took him and his roommates into the group that had already bonded, but the group also acknowledged the disconnect Participant 6 felt, which was a big help to him.

Another common element in the participants' experience was that it helped when the people who had been on campus during the fall initiated contact with them as the new person in the hall. While describing her experience transitioning to life in the campus residence hall, Participant 4 said, "I remember it because the day that I can remember

girls making an effort to talk to us, and they want to hear about what we went through.”

Participant 6 echoed that appreciation of when people she lived with took the initiative to invite her to activities and events. Recalling her attitude in trying to adjust, she said, “But I would throw myself out there. Like I didn’t know these people but they were like ‘hey, you want to go get food’ and I’m like, ‘yeah sure, I have no idea who you are.’”

Having people take the initiative helped the process of transition to a residential campus, but the experience was not seemingly impacted by the fact that the participants spent their first semester abroad. The experiences described to the researcher seemed similar to those of students who come directly to campus as freshmen in the fall.

While most participants had good experiences with their living situation and viewed it as helpful in the transition process, two participants mentioned negative experiences with those who lived around them, and those negative interactions made their transition difficult. When describing the people she lived with, Participant 7 said,

The girls are great. They had great intentions, I’m sure, but I think it’s hard it they’re not prepared and we’re not assertive enough to ask questions and know how to interact with us freshmen. . . . I never clicked with my floor, which is really odd. That made it difficult.

Thus, while a good experience with fellow students on a residence hall floor can help a transition, a less than stellar residential experience can hinder the transition of students who come in halfway through the year.

Subtheme: Residence life student leaders. While describing other students who helped their campus transition experience, a couple of participants specifically mentioned the student leaders in their residence halls. Specifically, participants talked about the role

resident assistants had in assisting their transition to campus and making sure they transitioned well. According to Participant 3,

I think probably one of the biggest factors was probably my RAs on my floor.

They would come and check on me all the time just to make sure . . . that school was all right, and that I was getting into the groove of things and was just not stressing over my work and stuff like that.

No gender difference emerged as significant with regard to the impact resident assistants had on the transition experience of participants. Participant 6, who moved onto an all-female floor recalled, “My RA was great. She was amazing. . . . She was really good at . . . trying to include me and I that about her. So that was really helpful.” While in some cases the residence life student leaders were also upperclassmen, the fact that some participants saw a distinction in the role of regular residents compared to the way student leaders impacted their transition was significant.

Theme 5: Role of Experiential Learning

Four of the eight participants talked about how what they experienced or learned during their semester impacted their transition experience to campus. Participants mentioned that having already worked through a transition to a new culture helped their experience when coming to campus. In discussing how this learning impacted the campus transition, Participant 2 said,

The experience of getting the chance to go and actively think about, all the time, other people – where they come from and what their culture s and that affects who they are, what they say, what they do and how they think made coming to college and not having so much conflict, or knowing how to deal with conflict, lot better

than freshmen that just walk in the front door. . . . I think that is a great thing I got to learn before I came to college . . . that maybe a lot of people don't.

Participant 6 added the idea of seeing campus or a living area as a new culture to move into, similar to when one studies abroad:

I mean [studying abroad] was all about coming into the new and becoming culturally competent and the wing itself, like my wing – think you consider wing culture a culture itself so I think once I realized that my transition was really easy because I had already had transitioned to a new culture globally and now it's a new culture on campus.

Not only did participants apply that learning to their campus transitions, but it also affected how they sought to make the transition as smooth as possible. When discussing how what was learned while abroad impacted the campus transition, Participant 5 said,

I think that we went over and we were learning about how to approach another culture and to take it as it is. . . . You approach something new, you take out any assumptions that you have, and you empty your cup and you just let that other thing fill it back up. I think that it would have been completely counterintuitive and counterproductive if I came back to America and didn't apply that to readjusting . . . if I didn't come back and take the people back home as they were and not assume things about them. If I didn't apply everything I learned, then the whole trip and all the experiences that I had would have been in vain.

Once participants saw that they could use what they learned while studying abroad in making the transition to campus, the transition was much easier for those who made the effort to apply that learning as they entered the culture of the home campus.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The impact that spending the first semester of college abroad has on the transition experience of students to a residential campus is an area of research that has not been explored to any great depth. The lack of literature specific to this focus, however, does not mean that the results of the current study do not fit within existing literature, especially on topics such as student transition to college and the myriad diverse effects study abroad has on the college student experience.

One of the major themes participants discussed in this study was homesickness. This expressed sentiment was consistent with research that exists on transition to college. Among college freshman, homesickness is a common occurrence and can lead to problems with concentration and low motivation (Terry et al., 2013). This study found that participants did not feel homesick for their hometown or their parents' home but were instead homesick for the location in which they studied abroad.

A second major theme that arose from participant interviews was that their fellow students played the biggest role in assisting their transition to campus halfway through the year. One of the most significant factors that influences how well students transition is when they go through a turning point in the process that helps them to feel belonging on campus (Palmer et al., 2009). For a clear majority of the participants in the current study, that turning point experience was building relationships with people in their living

area. The upperclassmen or residence hall student leaders reached out to them, extended invitations to join activities, or simply asked about the experiences they had while studying abroad. These newly formed relationships helped participants feel at home the same way those types of relationships make freshmen who transition to college in August or September feel at home (Wilcox et al., 2005). The difference in the experience of participants and what is documented in the literature is timing. For many, that transition experience and the attached sense of belonging happen in the first six to eight weeks of school (Palmer et al., 2009). For the participants in the current study, that period of transition and feeling comfortable on campus took anywhere from a couple of weeks to almost the entirety of the spring semester, and some did not feel comfortable until they came back to campus for their sophomore year.

The second group that impacted the transition experience of participants was the other members of their study abroad program cohort. These cohorts closely resemble Stassen's (2003) coordinated studies model for a living-learning community. Participants described their cohort as a group they could go to during the difficult times in the transition process and a group with whom they could get involved on campus. What the participants described confirms that involvement in a living-learning community eases the transition of students to college (Inkelas et al., 2007), even if those students are transitioning halfway through their first year of college.

A third theme that many participants discussed during their interviews was that the new skills they developed in engaging another culture impacted their transition to life on campus. This kind of personal growth and application of learning is a common trait among students who choose to study abroad (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Spiering &

Erickson, 2006). The participants applied this benefit of studying abroad in a way that most students who go abroad in their sophomore or junior year need not consider.

Participants thought that this type of experience gave them an advantage on their classmates at an institution that prides itself on global engagement because they felt they knew how to do it before many of their classmates.

One surprising finding from listening to the transition stories of participants was that none seemed affected by the reverse culture shock that often accompanies the reentry process from study abroad. Following their semester abroad, all of the participants came back to the United States at least three weeks before coming to campus at the beginning of January. While all the participants talked about what shocked them when coming back to the United States, they adjusted to life at home before this culture shock could impact their transition to living in a campus residence hall. The reason for the lack of impact that culture shock had on the students' transition could be that they all studied abroad in a culture fairly similar to that of the United States. Adler (1981) found that people who live in a culture far different from their own have a harder time working through reverse culture shock than those who live for long periods of time in a very similar culture to that of their home country. In other words, the impact of reverse culture shock on students who participate in similar programs may depend on the location of the study abroad site.

Amid the many similarities and themes in the data, there remained much about the transition stories of participants that was not shared by the majority. Some elements proved specific to the personality or attitude of individuals, while other components seemed unique to the experience and relationships between members of specific cohorts represented in the participant pool. This variety shows that, even with the participants

sharing certain aspects of the transition process, the impact of spending one's first semester abroad on one's transition to a residential college campus may be more dependent on the individual or the specific group than it is in general to students who choose to participate in this type of study abroad program.

Implications for Practice

The results of the current study have several implications for higher education practitioners, particularly those who work in student affairs. First, residence life professionals need to prepare students for helping to welcome those who move into the living areas. Data collection from this study reveals the importance of the role of upperclassmen and residence hall student leaders in their transition experience. When the established hall residents took the initiative to welcome study participants by inviting them to activities, the transition went well. On the other hand, study participants had a difficult time transitioning when they did not feel welcomed by those already living on the floor or wing of the residence hall. If residence life professionals encourage their student leaders to take the initiative and encourage peers to do the same, it should prove to be a tremendous help in adjusting new students to life in the residence hall.

In addition, established residents should be encouraged to ask about the experience their fellow residents had while studying abroad. Participants frequently discussed how they were homesick for the location they lived in while studying abroad and not necessarily their domestic home. Thus, in the same way that upperclassmen might ask freshmen about where they are from and about their hometown, it might be prudent for upperclassmen and fellow freshmen to ask study abroad participants about their experience as a way to combat the homesickness they may be feeling for the city

and country they called home for the four months or so before moving to yet another unfamiliar location.

This study also has implications for those who assist the students' transition to campus. Student affairs professionals and student leaders can help students see how the cross-cultural skills they developed while abroad could help in the transition to campus. A theme that arose was the idea that, once participants viewed moving to campus as a new culture to experience and learn about, being new was not so difficult. This theme could help study abroad administrators prepare students to think this way to ease the adjustment process.

Implications for Future Research

The current study is just the beginning of looking at the experience of students who choose to spend the first semester of college abroad, as well as the impact that doing so may have on their college experience. The current study looked at transition experiences from three different cohorts of students. A further study that looked at more than the three cohorts would give a more complete picture of the transition experience of students who took part in the program used in this study, which would be of great benefit to the program administrators and the institution that hosts the program. This study may provide valuable information in preparing participants for the transition experience, as well as students on campus who could help program participants adjust to life on campus.

Another future study could compare the transition experiences of students who chose to spend their first semester of college abroad and the transition experience of those who came to campus at the beginning of fall semester their freshman year. While plenty of literature exists on the transition experience of college freshmen, a study like this

could bring greater clarity to the impact that first-semester study abroad programs have on a student's transition to a residential campus; this study might directly compare the experiences of the two groups by having the groups participate in interviews with the same set of questions or take the same survey.

Lastly, a study that includes participants from several programs that send freshmen abroad during their first semester of college could lead to more generalizable results. A study of multiple institutions could consider data from schools with different residential cultures, locations, types of institutions, and other factors. This data could be used to then design a quantitative study of the experience of students who participate in study abroad programs in their freshman year.

Limitations

Certain limitations to the present study should be noted. First, six of the eight participants were female. While there were no specific interview questions about the role gender may have played in a participant's experience, it should still be recognized that having a clear majority of participants in the study from one gender may have impacted the results of this study.

The second limitation of the study is sample size. Collecting data from only eight participants of only one study abroad program limited the responses that could have been collected with a larger sample size including more participants from more years of the program. Some of the cohorts that participated in the study were quite small, which made it difficult to find diverse participants and could have limited the results. As a result of the small cohorts, half of the study participants were from the same cohort. This commonality may have skewed the results to reflect the transition experience of one

cohort instead of a general sense of the transition experience of freshmen who participated in the program. Third, the researcher only collected data from participants from a single, freshmen-only study abroad program. Thus, the findings of the current study may not be applicable to some varieties of freshman only study abroad programs.

The fourth limitation of the current study is the differences between the three study abroad groups that participants were from. These differences included size of the group, the male-to-female ratio, and a change in both student and professional leadership between the semesters. These differences may have impacted how much of a support system a participant had during his or her transition time or how much help a participant had in developing skills to employ throughout the transition to campus.

Finally, the institution at which the study took place has a high percentage of students living on campus. Over 90% of the students live in campus housing, which is higher than the average in American higher education. This cultural importance of living on campus may have influenced the responses of participants in a way that makes this study less generally applicable to the experience of freshmen who study abroad at campuses that do not expect most students to live on campus.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact that studying abroad during the first semester of freshman year had on a student's transition to a residential campus. The research looked at three years of one study abroad program that was only open to incoming freshmen at one university. These students not only dealt with the difficulty of transition to a new campus environment, but many of them struggled when transitioning back to their home country. Participants had common experiences such as a longing to be back in the place

where they studied abroad, a reliance on fellow program participants to successfully transition to campus after the program ended, and a dependence on those in their campus living areas for help in the process of moving into a new space. Participants also used the knowledge of stepping into a new culture for the first time to aid in the process of coming to a campus that had a culture unfamiliar to them. Not only were these experiences common among participants, but they were also mostly seen as positively impacting the transition experience.

In addition to the common experiences of participants, everyone was impacted in their own unique ways by spending the first semester of college abroad and in ways that seemed unique to each cohort involved in the study. The semester that students spent abroad before coming to campus halfway through their freshman year influenced the students in some ways, and in others they had an experience similar to that of any other freshman who comes to colleges for the first time in the fall of his or her first year. Despite these similarities, it is important for institutions with first-semester, freshman-only study abroad programs to understand that participants in these programs have a different transition experience than the typical first-year student. These schools need to train their student and professional staff to initiate relationships with these students and equip the students returning from abroad to use their newly developed cross-cultural engagement skills to aid in their transition process. If universities commit to taking these steps, the students who study abroad as first-semester freshmen may have an easier time transitioning to campus halfway through their first year of college.

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Appendix A

E-mail to Potential Participants

Dear [Program Name] Alumni,

My name is Ryan Hawkins, and I am a second year student in the Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development (MAHE) program [here at the university]. As a requirement of the program, I have to do an original research project about a topic in higher education.

My research is exploring the effects of spending the first semester of freshman year abroad on a student's transition to college. You are being contacted because of your participation in a study abroad program during the first semester of your freshman year [at the university].

I am asking for 8-12 people who would be willing to be participate in a recorded interview that would last no more than one hour. We will simply discuss your experience transitioning to Taylor's campus halfway through your freshman year. If you are interested in participating in my study, please send me an email and we can go ahead and arrange a time and a place to meet. If you have any further questions about the study please do not hesitate to email me.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

Ryan Hawkins, M.A.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

- Tell me about your trip.
 - What was it like?
 - How would you describe your experience overall?
- Do you think you experience any kind of culture shock when you returned to the United States?
- If yes, how did that manifest itself?
- What kinds of things did you do to prepare yourself for coming to campus?
 - What activities were done with the group?
 - What, if anything, did you do on your own to prepare?
- Tell me a little bit about your experience when you arrived on campus
 - How was the interaction with your roommate, wingmates, etc.?
- Can you tell me a little bit about the transition to campus academically?
- What was your interaction with other trip participants like when you returned?
 - How often did you spend time together?
 - Did you live with a trip participant when you returned?
- Can you tell me a little bit about how the interactions with your group has changed over the time since you have returned from Ireland?
- What are the things that helped your transition to campus?
- What sorts of things made your transition to campus difficult?
- Anything else about your transition experience you would like to share?

Appendix C

Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT

The Impact of First Semester Study Abroad Programs on College Transition

You are invited to participate in a research study of the impact of first semester freshman study abroad programs and their effect on a student's transition to a college campus. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you participated in a first semester freshman study abroad program. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this study. The study is being conducted by Ryan Hawkins with the Department of Higher Education.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of spending first semester of freshman year in an international living learning community has on a student's transition to a residential college campus.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

If you agree to participate, you will be one of eight to twelve subjects who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

You will attend a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will be conducted at a time and place of the researcher and participant's choosing. There will be one interview for each participant, and it will last for approximately one hour. The full course of interviews should be completed in approximately two weeks.

RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

The anticipated emotional and psychological risks from participating in this study are minimal to none, and there will be no physical risks involved with participation in the study. However, at any time you feel that answering questions during the interview stirs up feelings of anxiety or any other discomfort you are free to withdraw.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

There are no direct benefits from taking part in this study. However, participants may experience an indirect benefit of being able to talk about their experience of

transitioning to a college campus part way through their freshman year after beginning study in an international living learning community.

ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

The only alternative option to participating in this study is to not participate in the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Audio recordings will be made of each interview, but these recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and will only be accessible by the researcher through locked computer files. These recordings will be destroyed after the research has been completed and the thesis has been successfully defended.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Skip Trudeau, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

COSTS

There are no costs associated with being a participant in this study.

PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

COMPENSATION FOR INJURY

In the event of physical injury resulting from your participation in this research, necessary medical treatment will be provided to you and billed as part of your medical expenses. Costs not covered by your health care insurer will be your responsibility. Also, it is your responsibility to determine the extent of your health care coverage. There is no program in place for other monetary compensation for such injuries. If you are participating in research which is not conducted at a medical facility, you will be responsible for seeking medical care and for the expenses associated with any care received.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OF PROBLEMS

For questions about the study, or research related injury, contact the researcher Ryan Hawkins at 216.925.3223 or ryan_hawkins@taylor.edu. You may also contact Dr. Skip Trudeau, the faculty sponsor for this project, at 765-998-5368. Additionally, for further questions about this study and your rights as a participant you may contact Taylor's institutional Review Board at irb@taylor.edu or the chair of IRB, Susan Gavin at 765-998-5188 or ssgavin@taylor.edu

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the Department of Higher Education or Ryan Hawkins, the researcher. There is no risk with withdrawal prior to completion of the study.

SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

